

## NAVAL ARMS CONTROL

by Ron Purver

### INTRODUCTION

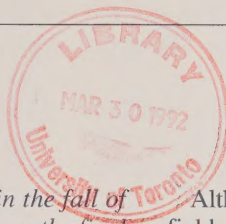
*Although this paper was written in the fall of 1991, before such momentous events as the final dissolution of the USSR, the issues that it covers remain current, in that large standing naval forces continue to exist on both sides of the former East-West divide. In the Soviet case, it appears that the vast bulk of the Soviet Navy will be inherited by Russia, although a dispute continues with Ukraine over the disposition of the Black Sea Fleet. With the continued 'free-fall' of the former Union's economy, of course, the issue of the proliferation beyond its borders of various types of military equipment, including naval vessels, has become all the more urgent.*

The world has witnessed truly breathtaking progress in many fields of arms control in recent years, especially between East and West. One area that has remained virtually untouched, however, despite repeated calls by the USSR and some Western analysts, is that of naval arms. Strategic nuclear weapons at sea, it is true, have fallen under the constraints of successive strategic arms limitation agreements. Tactical nuclear weapons at sea have begun to be addressed by the Bush-Gorbachev unilateral initiatives of September-October 1991. However, other categories of naval forces (known as "general-purpose forces") have largely escaped any such constraints. Why is this? What is the record of past attempts at naval arms control, and why has progress been so slow (or non-existent)? What are the prospects for future negotiated measures? Do some areas of naval arms control hold more promise than others?

### HISTORICAL EFFORTS

Although often considered a relatively new field, naval arms control in fact has a long (and somewhat controversial) history. One of the world's oldest and most successful examples of arms control is the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817, which helped forestall a naval arms race between Britain and the US on the Great Lakes after the War of 1812. Other, lesser-known bilateral and multilateral agreements were negotiated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Argentine-Chilean Naval Pact of 1902 and the Greco-Turkish Naval Protocol of 1930. Some accords, such as the Montreux Convention of 1936 limiting non-littoral warships in the Black Sea, were relatively successful and long-lasting. Others, notably various restrictions on submarine operations, fared less well.

But the greatest experiment in naval arms control — in what amounted to the strategic weaponry of the time — was inaugurated by the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. Among other things, it set a tonnage ceiling on the capital ships of the US, Britain, Japan, France, and Italy (the five greatest maritime powers of the day), forcing the scrapping of no fewer than sixty-eight ships already built or under construction. It also limited modernization, imposing a ten-year moratorium (later extended to fifteen) on the construction of new capital ships, and stipulated that capital ships and aircraft carriers were to be replaced only after they had reached twenty years of age. Finally, ceilings were placed on the maximum displacement and gun size of classes





of ships (e.g., battleships were limited to 35,000 tons and sixteen-inch guns).

Followed by the London Naval Treaties of 1930 and 1936, the Washington Treaty established a fifteen-year "system" that resulted in considerable disarmament, probably saved a good deal of money, and helped improve political relations between the leading naval competitors, at least temporarily (and in the case of Britain and the US, more permanently).

## EXISTING CONSTRAINTS ON NAVAL FORCES AND ACTIVITIES

Naval forces were included in the various schemes for general and complete disarmament that were bruited about in the aftermath of World War II. However, they were rarely singled out for special attention by arms control advocates. Nevertheless, many of the bilateral and multilateral agreements negotiated over the past several decades — both regional and global — have indirectly affected naval forces, or the ocean environment in which they operate.

For example, the demilitarization provisions of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty apply to the entire area south of 60 degrees South latitude, including ocean areas, albeit with a proviso safeguarding "the rights...of any State under international law with regard to the high seas within that area." The 1963 Partial Test-Ban Treaty prohibits nuclear testing, among other places, "under water, including territorial waters or high seas." The 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco establishing a Latin American Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone is supposed to apply to an area encompassing large swaths of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, once it has come into force for all of the states of the region (although the major maritime powers have entered reservations on this point). Finally, the 1971 Seabed Arms Control Treaty prohibits the emplacement of any nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction on the ocean floor beyond a narrow coastal band.

Amphibious troops were included in the provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) concerning the prior notification of major military manoeuvres in Europe. At the Madrid Review Conference of the CSCE in September 1983, the mandate of the subsequent Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe (CCSBMDE, or the "Stockholm Conference") was agreed to cover "the whole of Europe as well as the adjoining sea area," but with

regard to the latter, to apply only to those naval activities (such as amphibious assault, naval gun fire support, or tactical air strikes ashore) connected to operations on land. The September 1986 Final Document of the Stockholm Conference included a provision requiring 42 days' advance notice of the landing of more than 3,000 amphibious troops, and permitting observation in the case of more than 5,000 troops.

Naval forces generally were excluded from the mandate of the more recent negotiations on reducing conventional forces in Europe (CFE). However, in connection with the signing of the CFE Treaty in November 1990 the two groups of participating states adopted a politically binding declaration limiting the number of "permanently land-based naval combat aircraft" to 430 on each side.

### *Soviet-American Measures*

In 1972, the US-Soviet SALT I Interim Agreement on Offensive Forces froze the number of submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and modern ballistic missile submarines at the level operational or under construction at the time of its signature, except for a small increment as replacements for older land- or submarine-based launchers. Another product of SALT I, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, prohibited the development, testing, or deployment of any sea-based ABM systems or components. At the same time, the US and USSR signed a bilateral Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents at Sea (the "INCSEA" Agreement) which sought to establish "rules of the road" for naval units in close proximity to each other, e.g. by prohibiting simulated attacks. The USSR later signed similar agreements with many other Western countries, including Canada.

The SALT II Treaty, signed in 1979 but never ratified, included SLBM launchers in its ceiling of 2,400 on "strategic nuclear delivery vehicles" (SNDVs), as well as SLBMs with multiple warheads (MIRVed) within its sub-limit of 1,200 on MIRVed ballistic missile launchers. The MIRVing of individual SLBMs was capped by limiting their re-entry vehicles to fourteen. SALT II also prohibited so-called "futuristic" systems such as ballistic missiles on surface ships; ballistic or cruise missiles on the seabed, including internal and inland waters; and "heavy" SLBMs (comparable to the largest land-based missiles). A Protocol to the SALT II Treaty, intended to last for three years, prohibited the deployment of long-range cruise missiles on sea-based launchers (SLCMs), as well as the testing of such missiles equipped with MIRVs.



The July 1991 START Treaty, like SALT II, includes SLBMs within the ceiling of 1,600 SNDVs on each side. In addition, SLBM warheads are included within a sub-ceiling of 4,900 on ballistic missile warheads, and new types of SLBMs (as well as ICBMs) are limited to a maximum of ten warheads each. Long-range, nuclear-armed SLCMs are not included within the treaty itself, but are limited to 880 on each side by a separate, politically binding declaration, which also bans the production or deployment of MIRVed nuclear SLCMs.

Two recent but lesser-known US-Soviet agreements touching on naval forces also deserve mention. They are the 1988 ballistic missile launch notification agreement requiring 24 hours' advance notice of the planned date, launch area, and impact area of any test launch of a strategic ballistic missile, including SLBMs; and the 1989 "Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities." Among other things, the latter commits each side to refrain from the use of force against accidental border incursions by the other side's military vessels. Canada and the USSR signed a similar agreement in May 1991.

#### *Other Efforts and Proposals*

Other proposals for naval arms control in the postwar period have tended to emanate from either the United Nations or the Soviet Union. The naval arms race has been an item on the agenda of the UN Disarmament Commission (UNDC) since 1956. In 1985, the report of a UN Group of Experts presented a long list of possible naval arms control and confidence-building measures (CBMs) for consideration, urging that priority be given to nuclear weapons issues. In 1987, a UNDC working group produced another paper emphasizing various naval CBMs, including a multilateral incidents-at-sea agreement and the updating of the 1907 Hague Convention on Mines. However, all of these efforts have been stymied by the United States, which has often stood alone in opposing UN resolutions on the subject.

One naval arms control initiative which did reach the stage of formal negotiations in the postwar period concerned the Indian Ocean. In 1971, the UN General Assembly, by a vote of 61-0 with 55 abstentions (the latter significantly including all of the Permanent Members of the Security Council except China), declared the Indian Ocean to be a "Zone of Peace." The following year, the Assembly established an Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean, which has been meeting ever since to consider practical measures for the implementation of the Zone.

While this latter effort has proved unsuccessful, US President Carter did eventually embrace an earlier Soviet proposal for negotiated restraints on US and Soviet naval forces in the region. Four rounds of US-Soviet negotiations on the subject, dubbed by some as the "Naval Arms Limitation Talks," actually took place from mid-1977 to early 1978. The two sides reportedly reached an agreement in principle to freeze their military activities in the region at the then current level, while pledging to work for actual reductions in the near future. However, the talks were broken off by the US in protest against increased Soviet military involvement in the Horn of Africa and, despite repeated Soviet entreaties, were never resumed.

The Soviet Union has long been a proponent of naval arms control, promoting measures which, in the view of the US and the other major Western maritime powers, would disproportionately benefit the USSR's own military position at the expense of the West. As early as July 1968, in a memorandum submitted to the UN, the Soviet government called for the "cessation of patrols by missile-carrying submarines with nuclear missiles on board in areas where the borders of parties to such an agreement are within range of such missiles." Similar proposals have been advanced for restrictions on the forward deployment of aircraft carriers and other nuclear-capable naval vessels. In June 1971, the USSR proposed a more general, reciprocal limitation of superpower naval forces in areas "far from their own shores," such as the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

At about this time, some Western arms control analysts proposed the establishment of "sanctuaries" or "anti-submarine warfare (ASW)-free zones" as an analogue to the ABM Treaty, to help preserve the retaliatory capability of ballistic missile-carrying submarines. This idea was taken up by the USSR during the SALT II negotiations in 1978, and again at the START talks in 1982. However, the US side — confident of the superiority of its own ASW and submarine technologies — successfully resisted such moves.

Proposals for naval confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) were first introduced into the CSCE process by the neutral and non-aligned (NNA) states prior to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and again at the Belgrade Review Conference in 1977-1978. They became a major issue at the Madrid Review Conference in the early 1980s, when the Warsaw Pact states argued strongly for the application of CSBMs to "independent" naval activities, not just those directly connected to land forces. In the end, however, they were forced to back



down, setting a pattern for subsequent unsuccessful attempts by the Warsaw Pact and the NNA to introduce such measures.

In the late 1980s, naval measures figured prominently in a series of Soviet proposals for arms control in neighbouring regions, including the Asia-Pacific, Arctic, and Mediterranean. These included ASW-free zones, various kinds of naval CBMs (such as prenotification and observation of exercises, and limiting their number and size), limits on naval activity in international straits and zones of intensive shipping and fishing, and multilateral incidents-at-sea agreements. Beginning with a Baltic Fleet exercise in 1988, the Soviet Union began inviting foreign observers to attend certain of its own naval exercises, describing this as a “unilateral CBM.” Neighbouring states in the regions concerned — as well as the major Western maritime powers — have been highly skeptical of most of these proposals. American allies such as Norway and Japan, in particular, fear the possible impact of such measures on the US ability and willingness to support them militarily in the event of a crisis.

Apart from their regional initiatives, the Soviets in recent years have called repeatedly for the convening of negotiations, or at least preliminary consultations (even if only at the expert level), on the limitation and reduction of naval forces generally. In early 1988, for example, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze called for an international conference, initially limited to the US, USSR, UK, and France, to discuss a treaty on the global reduction of naval forces. Later that year, Marshal Akhromeyev proposed bilateral talks between the US and USSR to reduce those elements of their naval forces that each side considered most provocative. While accepting the Western position that the CFE talks in Vienna should not themselves extend to naval forces, Soviet officials warned that progress in arms control on land and in the air in that theatre would be tied closely to parallel moves to reduce naval forces. In the end, no such linkage was made, and substantial cuts in conventional forces (as well as an even more substantial unilateral withdrawal of Soviet troops from Central and Eastern Europe) were made even in the absence of progress on naval arms control.

### *Obstacles to Progress*

The failure to make greater progress in naval arms control can be easily explained by the pre-eminence of the US as a maritime power. The US argues that, unlike the USSR, it is critically dependent on its oceanic links to trading partners and allies. Although the Soviet Navy

has long been superior in sheer numbers of vessels, the US Navy, built around a force of aircraft carriers without parallel in the Soviet Navy (and hence with a much larger gross tonnage), has been universally recognized as superior overall, in terms of its capabilities and, especially, technological sophistication.

Unlike the case with strategic nuclear weapons, where the US is satisfied with “rough parity,” it considers the retention of its superiority at sea to be absolutely essential to its security interests. Moreover, the fundamentally different maritime interests and roles of the two superpowers have resulted in radically different force structures and strategies for their navies. The US concentrates on protecting the “sea lines of communication” or SLOCs (“sea control”) and maintaining a substantial strike capability ashore (“power projection”). In contrast, the Soviet Navy has focussed on defence of the homeland, including threats to the SLOCs (“sea denial”), by relying primarily on a massive submarine force. These further asymmetries are believed to make the pursuit of balanced arms control that much more difficult.

To these geostrategic factors must be added the traditional autonomy and jealously guarded independence of the Navy within the US military structure. Its perspective has to a considerable degree been shared by political decision-makers, and with the aid of key Congressional supporters, the Navy has proven more successful than some of the other services in resisting constraints on its activities. For these reasons, then, it has been generally hostile to — and largely successful in preventing — consideration of naval arms control measures involving “general-purpose” forces.

Nevertheless, many Western analysts and a number of Western governments, including Canada’s, have grown increasingly receptive to certain forms of naval arms control. Among the more popular proposed measures have been: (1) various kinds of naval CSBMs; (2) naval “tactical denuclearization”; and, (3) attack submarine limits.

### **NAVAL CSBMs**

As noted above, both the neutral and non-aligned (especially such states as Sweden and Finland) and the USSR continue to push for various forms of naval CSBMs, at the UN as well as in the CSCE. In response, a number of NATO states — including Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, and Turkey — have either explicitly endorsed modest forms of naval



CSBMs or reportedly expressed sympathy for them in NATO councils. In fact, according to a May 1990 report of the North Atlantic Assembly (the parliamentary group which has been particularly active on this question), among NATO members "perhaps only the US, France, Portugal, and Spain still object to discussion of naval CSBMs." However, the US Navy has remained adamantly opposed to virtually any form of naval arms control, including CSBMs, with the exception of bilateral incidents-at-sea type agreements and the exchange of visits by naval personnel.

The reasons for continued Western naval opposition to CSBMs in particular are manifold. As a matter of general principle, navies are highly valued for their mobility and flexibility, making any kind of constraints on their movements or operations anathema to those who command them. The traditional "freedoms of the high seas" are often invoked in this regard, and thoroughly permeate naval thinking. Although certain types of modest CSBMs might be considered relatively innocuous in themselves, it is feared that to budge even an inch constitutes a kind of "slippery slope" to more dramatic and far-reaching forms of naval arms control.

Naval "purists" also object to the idea that concepts developed for land forces in the European theatre can be transferred holus-bolus to the radically different environment of the sea. Thus, exchanging observers on warships is ruled out on the grounds that the confined quarters of a naval vessel would virtually guarantee the compromising of sensitive information. Close observation of exercises at sea is a common practice in any case, it is said, so there is no *need* for legislation to this effect, as on land. Requiring prior notification of ship movements would deprive navies of one of their most important functions of signalling intentions during a crisis. (Of course, this depends entirely on one's perspective; what the maritime powers may consider as mere "signalling," in the interests of preserving international peace and security, may appear to the target of the signal as nothing less than a crude attempt at intimidation.) Finally, the risk of dangerous incidents arising from naval activities at sea is said to be greatly exaggerated. Thus, naval CSBMs have been rejected both on the grounds that they are prejudicial to the traditional freedoms of the high seas and threaten to vitiate the whole purpose of navies, and on the grounds that they are unnecessary or would be ineffective in their stated aim of preventing conflict arising from misunderstanding or misperception.

In spite of these widely held opinions, however, growing numbers of naval analysts — including many

serving or retired senior naval officers — have expressed the view that certain kinds of naval CSBMs would not be harmful to Western security interests, and might be positively beneficial to them. For example, past massive and unannounced Soviet naval exercises are said to have caused considerable alarm in Western naval circles. In general, the West is thought to gain more from any move towards greater military transparency, given the traditional excessive secrecy of the Soviet Union. Smaller Western states located close to Soviet shores see obvious benefits in measures that would reduce the potential for intimidation by Soviet naval forces.

Perhaps most importantly, certain types of naval CSBMs promise to be mutually beneficial in reducing fears of a surprise attack, preventing or mitigating actions deemed to be provocative by one side or the other, and in generally strengthening mutual confidence and understanding by, in the words of Norwegian Defence Minister Johan Holst, "emphasizing the ritual quality of normal peacetime operations and downgrading the competitive dimension." There is no denying the fact, as retired British Admiral Richard Hill puts it, that "military activities at sea can give rise to alarm," and not only for smaller states. This is especially the case with sudden or unannounced naval movements or exercises. Furthermore, precisely *because* of the international nature of the sea, opposing forces frequently come into close contact with each other, increasing the prospect of incidents which, if not dangerously escalatory, can at least serve to sour political relations between states.

Even if one were to concede the view of some analysts that naval CSBMs on the Stockholm model are largely cosmetic and militarily insignificant, there remain compelling *political* arguments for the West to pursue them in negotiations. These include the alleviation of inter-allied tensions caused by continued US intransigence in the face of widespread support for naval arms control, particularly in the Nordic countries. Vis-à-vis the Soviets, such measures could strengthen the hand of proponents of arms control by showing at least some flexibility on an issue which Soviet hard-liners have considered a kind of litmus test of Western sincerity. Finally, naval CSBMs may serve a useful ground breaking function similar to that of CSBMs on land, by which military officers on both sides gradually grow more accustomed to increased transparency and the regulation of their activities — perhaps eventually permitting the same kind of comprehensive arms control regime at sea that is now being brought to fruition, at long last, ashore.

It is likely that efforts to expand the mandate of future negotiations on CSBMs in Europe to include



“independent” naval activities will be revived at the Helsinki Follow-Up Meeting of the CSCE in 1992. The rapid deterioration of the Soviet Union’s economy and confusion within its military after the unsuccessful coup attempt of August 1991 may suggest to some that the era of East-West competition at sea is over, further obviating the need for naval CSBMs. Nevertheless, large standing naval forces remain on both sides of the former East-West divide. Given their continued existence, as well as the tremendous uncertainty which remains regarding the future prospects and direction of the USSR’s successor republics, there may yet be a place for such measures. Moreover, there is no reason why CSBMs originally conceived in the context of European or East-West military competition could not be applied, with appropriate modifications, to various other regions of the world where tensions remain high and indigenous naval capabilities continue to grow.

## NAVAL TACTICAL DENUCLEARIZATION

Calls for a total ban on naval tactical nuclear weapons have come from many quarters. Some have argued that such a ban would benefit the West by removing one cause of continuing friction between the US and many of its allies, who resented the former’s rigid adherence to an official policy of refusing to confirm or deny the presence of nuclear weapons aboard its visiting warships or at its overseas military installations. In addition, tactical nuclear weapons were judged to be ill-suited for the traditional naval mission of signalling resolve in a crisis; were said to encourage a pre-emptive attack by the other side; and were feared by many naval officers to hamper the use of their forces in more traditional, conventional scenarios. The actual detonation of such weapons in war, it was feared, would severely disrupt electronic sensors in which the US otherwise maintained a comparative advantage. Some critics were concerned over the command and control of such weapons at sea, since they were not provided with the same kind of permissive action links (PALs) to prevent unauthorized or inadvertent launch as were their land-based counterparts. Finally, the increased accuracy and overall lethality of new, precision-guided conventional weapons were rendering naval tactical nuclear weapons unnecessary for many of their traditional missions.

Perhaps the most persuasive case against naval tactical nuclear weapons, however, was that made by President Reagan’s senior arms control adviser (and former Secretary of the Navy) Paul Nitze, who in April 1988, called for a ban on the grounds that such weapons were a “great equalizer” for the Soviet Navy. The US, he

warned, risked losing its otherwise unassailable overall superiority at sea if a conflict escalated from the conventional to the nuclear level, where a “single shot” from even a relatively small platform could destroy a capital ship (of which the US had many more) or disrupt a convoy or task force.

Such fears appeared confirmed by the fact that the Soviet Navy traditionally maintained a much larger number of nuclear-capable naval platforms, as well as a wider array (and higher number) of naval tactical nuclear weapons (including nuclear anti-ship missiles and nuclear torpedoes, which the US does not have). The Soviet force-structure and its training indicated a reliance on nuclear weapons for a quick and decisive engagement, rather than the protracted conventional war anticipated by the US. Nuclear weapons at sea were more suited for the Soviet Navy’s primary mission of “sea denial,” than for the Western navies’ predominant task of “sea control.” Furthermore, when long-range, land-attack SLCMs were included under the category of “naval tactical nuclear weapons,” many strategic analysts argued that the US was far more vulnerable to attack from such systems in the long run, despite its current technological advantages, given the higher concentration of population, industry and military targets in its coastal areas.

In spite of this, it was the USSR that first proposed a ban on tactical nuclear weapons at sea, and the US Navy that vigorously opposed it. However, it was reported in April 1989, that the US Navy had decided to unilaterally phase out, without replacement, three of its short-range tactical nuclear weapon systems — the ASROC and SUBROC anti-submarine weapons, and the Terrier anti-aircraft missile. These constituted about one-third of its non-strategic naval nuclear weapons. In November 1989, the US Energy Department confirmed that the nuclear warheads from two of the three systems to be phased out had already been retired, while retirement of the third was scheduled for the end of September 1990. Yet the US Navy insisted on carrying this out quietly, without any fanfare or attempt to gain negotiating leverage over the Soviet Union, apparently for fear of compromising its hard-line stance on naval arms control, and to retain some flexibility with regard to possible future deployments.

As late as April 1991, a Pentagon report to Congress argued that limits or a ban on naval tactical nuclear weapons were totally unacceptable. The reasons were many: difficulties of verification; the need to deter nuclear attacks from the shore; naval tactical nuclear weapons’ contribution to the doctrine of “flexible



response” by providing nuclear options short of strategic nuclear attack, and without depending on overseas basing or overflight rights; their “hedge” against a “catastrophic” failure of conventional ASW systems; and, their contribution to strategic stability by dispersing over a wide variety and large number of delivery platforms nuclear weapons ill-suited for a preemptive first strike.

Despite all of these arguments, however, in his dramatic speech of 27 September 1991, President Bush announced that the US would unilaterally withdraw all of its tactical nuclear weapons from surface ships, attack submarines, and land-based naval aircraft; nuclear-tipped Tomahawk long-range, land-attack cruise missiles and air-delivered nuclear bombs aboard aircraft carriers were specifically mentioned. As a matter of general policy, Bush pledged that “under normal circumstances, our ships will not carry tactical nuclear weapons.” He added that many of the withdrawn warheads would be dismantled and destroyed. Defense Secretary Cheney later revealed that these would be the “older” systems, constituting about 50% of those at sea, drawn from a stockpile which has been variously estimated by other sources at between 1,825 and 2,525. The remaining warheads, said Bush, would “be secured in central areas where they would be available if necessary in a future crisis.”

At the same time, Bush called on the USSR — which maintains an arsenal of naval tactical nuclear weapons and long-range, nuclear-tipped SLCMs estimated at between 2,450 and 3,075 — to reciprocate. Just over a week later, on 5 October 1991, President Gorbachev did precisely that, adding a call for the actual destruction of all naval tactical nuclear weapons. Thus, in a breathtaking reversal of traditional American policy, the Bush Administration appears to have taken the wind out of the sails of advocates of naval tactical denuclearization. However, as long as the more modern naval tactical nuclear weapons remain in storage, able to be re-deployed in the event of a crisis, the issue will remain on the global arms control agenda.

## ATTACK SUBMARINE LIMITS

One of the more daring naval arms control proposals of recent years is for deep cuts, or even a total ban, on ocean-going attack submarines. Much of the traditional East-West naval rivalry has been accounted for by the competition in submarines and anti-submarine warfare. The Soviet submarine force has long been considered the greatest threat to the Western sea lines of communi-

cation, while the American fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) has been considered by the Soviets as the greatest threat to their deterrent force of strategic ballistic missile submarines. Unlike aircraft carriers and most other surface ships, modern attack submarines have a relatively limited utility for navies in peace or conflicts short of a major East-West war. In any event, the vast bulk of their number in the US and Soviet navies is accounted for by the East-West competition, since other countries’ submarine fleets are still comparatively small. Modern attack submarines are also extremely expensive, with the latest US class, the SSN-21 *Seawolf*, estimated to cost over \$2 billion each. Finally, submarines have always had a rather poor public image, generating repeated unsuccessful attempts to control their operations or even to ban them outright.

Thus it is not surprising that, in an era of decreasing East-West tensions, attention turned to the attack submarine as a prime candidate for naval arms control. Proposals have ranged from one by Johan Holst for an outright ban on the ocean-going variety (leaving smaller, purely coastal defensive vessels untouched), to a suggestion by RAND Corporation analyst James Lacy for “deep cuts” — to about the level of fifty on each side — in the numbers of modern nuclear- and conventionally-powered attack submarines in the US and Soviet Navies. Concern has also been expressed about the proliferation of such submarines to other countries throughout the world.

As in the case of other forms of naval arms control, the US Navy has rejected proposals for bilateral limits on US and Soviet SSNs. It argues that the predominant US mission of sea control requires higher numbers of attack submarines than the main Soviet mission of sea denial, especially given the broader American role in the world. Because the current US production rate is so low, the Navy argues, any cuts in the existing planned force would seriously jeopardize the industrial and research base necessary to meet any future challenges. According to the Navy, cuts would not save much money, at least on the US side, since most American vessels are quite new and, given the cost of dismantling them and storing their nuclear waste, their continued operation would actually be less expensive than their scrapping. Finally, the Navy argues that a large US force is still needed to counter the increasing proliferation of submarines to countries other than the USSR (there are currently 222 conventionally-powered submarines in 21 Third World countries).

Advocates of negotiated cuts reply that the projected numbers of US submarines, given their technological



superiority and the number of hostile vessels they are likely to face in any particular Third World conflict, are still much higher than required for such contingencies. Furthermore, considerable sums of money could be saved by foregoing future production of submarines and attendant ASW forces.

It is true that the numbers of US and Soviet submarines are already declining substantially as a result of fiscal constraints and, in the Soviet case, the block obsolescence of older models. Thus, the Soviet nuclear-powered fleet is expected to peak at about 183 units in 1991 and fall to about 100 early in the 21st century. The US, which had 134 nuclear-powered submarines in 1988, now has only 122, and is expected to have just 83-88 (including 65-70 SSNs) by the turn of the century. Some disarmament advocates point to this as an example of "spontaneous disarmament" and use it as an argument against the need for formally negotiated limits on such vessels. However, relying completely on unilateral cutbacks may leave total force-levels much higher than they need otherwise be, and does not preclude a reversal of direction should political fortunes change. Neither side will ordinarily eliminate its most modern and capable forces without guaranteed assurances of reciprocity by the other. Thus, an expensive and wasteful arms race in submarines and ASW, substituting quality for quantity, could still continue.

There remains some question about the "negotiability" of deep cuts in attack submarines as a separable measure for the USSR. Senior Soviet naval officers have, in the past, rejected the idea of reducing the single strongest component of their fleet, without making corresponding cuts in areas of US naval strength, such as aircraft carriers. On the other hand, the USSR has, in recent years, accepted severely asymmetric cuts in other categories of military forces, such as ground-based conventional weaponry and strategic nuclear forces. And it remains the case that the only way of adequately testing the Soviet response to such a proposal is to actually make it, and see how they react. If other categories of naval vessels have to be brought into the picture too, this may not necessarily be a bad thing, given that so much of the US-Soviet naval buildup in recent years has been geared to a competition that seems so far removed from the political realities of today.

## CONCLUSION

What has just been said about proposed cuts in attack submarines can be applied to the subject of naval arms control generally. The numbers of ships in the world's

major navies are likely to continue to decline of their own accord, due to cost reasons, but their actual combat capabilities (spurred by a continuing technological arms race) will continue to grow. Unilateral and informal constraints may have an important role to play, but can never fully replace the precision, certainty of reciprocity, verifiability, and longevity or irreversibility (comparatively speaking) of formally negotiated agreements.

The focus of global naval arms control efforts will eventually shift from the remnants of the East-West competition at sea, to the proliferation of modern naval weaponry — and the stoking of incipient new rivalries — in the Third World. However, as long as the world's major maritime powers continue to maintain large standing naval forces — which they will do for the foreseeable future — various kinds of naval arms control may have an important role to play in averting dangerous incidents, improving political relations between states, and further reducing the costs of naval arms, not only on a regional but on a global level as well. President Bush's announcement of 27 September 1991 concerning tactical nuclear weapons at sea was a breathtaking reversal of traditional American attitudes to this subject, although it remained informal, unilateral, and incomplete. Whether this move will spur additional naval arms control efforts, or only dampen current interest by taking off some of the immediate pressure, remains to be seen. However, it is a dramatic opening which testifies to the extraordinary changes in the international security environment in recent years and even months, reminding us that what may have seemed far-fetched or unrealistic only a short time ago may now be within the realm of the possible.

Ron Purver is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute.

The views expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and should not be taken to represent the views of the Institute and its Board.

Published by the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security. Additional copies are available from the Institute: 360 Albert Street, Suite 900, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7X7.

*Le présent exposé est également publié en français.*

ISBN: 0-662-19423-3